

THE NEW TIBETAN REFUGEES

“For Tibetans the path to freedom is fraught with barriers both physical and emotional. To escape Chinese rule they must decide that life as a refugee is better than life deprived of culture, language, religion - most of all, independence. Only then can they embark on the more obviously arduous stage: the trek across the border patrolled by the Chinese military, through the Himalayas, into Nepal and finally to Dharamsala, the hill town in northern India where the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, set up a government in exile in 1959. Thousands of Tibetans choose to risk this path every year.”

- Tibet: An Awesome Escape, Time, January 8, 1996.

April 1997

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INTRODUCTION:

Historical Background: Tibet was an independent sovereign country before the Chinese invasion in 1949/50. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal head of the six million Tibetans made earnest efforts to retain the independence of Tibet and end the suffering of the Tibetan people for a decade. Because of Chinese belligerence he was unsuccessful and compelled to go into exile. The then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru welcomed and granted political asylum to him and his followers who numbered about 85,000 at that time. A Tibetan Government in-exile was set up soon after headed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

For 20 years, Tibet remained absolutely closed from the world until the so called 'Liberalization' was announced in late 1979. Thus began the second exodus of Tibetans. The desire to receive the blessing of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, to escape Chinese persecution on political and religious grounds, to obtain education in exile and pilgrimage to Buddhist holy sites are the main reasons for coming into exile. With renewed suppression and tightening of control; introduction of the 'Strike Hard' policy, there has been a steady increase in the influx.

The Escape Route for the New Refugees:

The New Refugees who come to India can broadly be classified into two categories - those with and without Chinese Permit.

Those who come with Chinese Permit: For a permit (Visa), a person has to pay 5000 - 6000 yuan each. While applying for a Permit, they mention visit to Nepal only for pilgrimage and to meet relatives there. Every person has to keep someone from their family as hostage/security against their return. On reaching Kathmandu, Nepal, they come into India secretly without the knowledge of the Chinese authorities. People in this group come mainly to receive blessings and religious teaching from His Holiness the Dalai Lama; pilgrimage to holy Buddhist sites; to meet relatives and friends in India & Nepal; to admit their children to the Tibetan Schools here or to meet those already admitted. People in this group come mostly during winter months- because the schools break for winter holiday and His Holiness the Dalai Lama usually bestows Kalachakra Initiation or other religious teachings during the winter months. They are always worried about reaching Tibet in time before the Permit validity expires.

Those Who Escape And Come Without Chinese Permit:

People in this group usually pretend to be going till Mount Kailash for pilgrimage. From there , they then walk across the Himalayas into Nepal border usually with little or no belongings except the clothes on their body. There are eight known passes between Tibet-Nepal border used by the escapees. The escapees undergo much hardship like frost-bite, starvation, sexual harassment by the border policemen, possible arrest en route, deportation at the border not to mention the constant fear of death. The number of deaths during the journey is still not known.

The journey from Mount Kailash to Kathmandu, Nepal usually takes about 1 to 1 ½ months during winter months, i.e. November, December, January & February, if they do not get stopped by the border police, fall sick or get caught in snow storms etc. During other months it takes lesser time on the way as there won't be as heavy snow on the Himalayas as during winter. People come in groups as it is safer, not necessarily family or relatives and could be anyone between babies few months old to old people 70 years old and above. Majority of them reach Kathmandu Reception Center in poor/weak health conditions - malnourished, frost-bitten cases, wounded with gun-shots, sexually abused etc.

Reception by the Tibetan Government in-exile:

Kathmandu Reception Center arranges for their release if under police custody, food, accommodation and medical care during their stay and their traveling to India. The New Arrivals are then screened by the UNHCR, Kathmandu to check whether they are refugees or not. Those categorized as refugees get NC2700/= (Nepalese Rupees) each. If there are two or more members of the same family, then the head of the family gets NC2700 and the dependents get NC900/= each. This amount covers for their expenses at Kathmandu and travel to Delhi, India. At Kathmandu Reception Center they are made to fill a form giving their details and what they aim to do in India. To complete all these formalities etc. takes 7-10 days, unless a person is sick or hospitalized.

At Delhi Reception Center, they usually stay for a period of 3 days, after which, they are either send to Dharamsala or to the Monasteries and Nunneries in Southern Tibetan Settlements depending on what they had filled in their introductory form given by the Kathmandu Reception Center. Every person will be carrying their own form with themselves. During their stay in Delhi, food and accommodation is provided free. Delhi Reception Center takes care of their traveling arrangements - to South India for those wanting to enter the Monasteries and Nunneries in Southern Tibetan Settlements and the rest to Dharamsala, where the Office of the Reception Centers is located and also the seat of the Tibetan Government in-exile headed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

In Dharamsala Reception Center, they are provided free food, accommodation and medical care during their stay. Here they stay for a maximum of 15 days during which time the Office of the Reception Centers (ORC), Dharamsala arrange audience for them with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and process their admission to the various institutions. Their traveling is arranged and paid for by the ORC. For groups of children, a guide-cum-caretaker during the journey is assigned.

There are Health Workers at the Kathmandu and Dharamsala Reception Centers who takes care of the minor medical care for the New Arrivals. Serious cases are referred to the hospitals in the neighborhood.

The New Refugees:

The New Refugees come to India for different reasons, with different expectations, though for all of them their foremost desire is to receive blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. From 1979 to March 31, 1997, 31293 New Refugees have reported to Dharamsala.

1. **Political Prisoners or Prisoners of Conscience:** This category includes those who have been imprisoned and tortured for taking active part in the peaceful pro-independence demonstrations or have spoken against the denial and suppression of the Tibetans' right to self-determination, freedom and human rights by the Chinese regime in Tibet. People under this group are victims of Chinese brutality during their imprisonment and most of them are in poor health conditions and disabled. They need medical help and the more important, psychological assistance. They could be anywhere between 15 years old to some more than 70 years old, both lay and ordained (monks & nuns).
2. **Those Escaping Religious Persecution:** The Communist regime in Tibet only tolerate those religious institutions which are tourist attractions. Since 1995, there has been serious religious persecution in Tibet. The authorities have fixed a limit on the number of monks and nuns that could be admitted to a particular monastery and nunnery. Those not included in the official list were expelled. Those with the official permit were asked to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama recognized by His Holiness etc. Unable to do so, many came into exile so that they could pursue serious Buddhist studies without these kind of hindrances. Some were not so fortunate and were imprisoned. In 1996 Ganden Monastery was completely closed down due to the non-cooperation of the monks there in denouncing their ultimate refugee, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This policy seemed widely spread all over Tibet.
3. **In Search of Education Opportunities:** The Education System in Tibet under the Chinese regime does not cater to the needs of the Tibetans. Tibetan language is not taught in the schools, with exception in few primary schools. History is naturally distorted. Chinese is compulsory and English almost unheard of. The parents want their children to grow up without losing their identity. So they send their small children with friends, relatives etc. into India in the hope of getting good education and to learn about Tibetan culture and tradition.
4. **For Pilgrimage And To Meet Friends And Relatives:** Every year and particularly during the Kalachakra teachings, many people come to receive the initiation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and simultaneously meet with their friends, relatives and children studying in the different schools in India.

Steps taken by the Tibetan Government in-Exile to meet their Expectations:

1. **Organization Set-up:** New Refugees first started coming into exile in 1979. Initially the responsibility of looking after the new refugees were taken by the Kashag (Cabinet) and the Private Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. However due to the ever increasing number of the New Refugees, a separate Office of the Reception Centers was set up in Dharamsala in June 1990 with its branches at Kathmandu, Nepal and Delhi, India. This Office provide reception facilities to all the New Refugees and takes care of them until their admission to the different institutions. The Tibetan Government

in-exile has also set up two separate special schools for those who could not be absorbed in the regular schools. One is the TCV School at Bir, an open school for those between age range of 14-17 years and the Tibetan Transit School, Dharamsala, and Adult Education Center for those between the age-range of 18-30 years. All our schools are co-education.

2. **Assimilation in the Various Institutions:** Monks, Nuns and lay people who wants to pursue religious studies are send to more than 50 different monasteries and nunneries in India. Those between 06 - 13 years of age are sent to either TCV or Tibetan Homes Foundation Schools. Those between 14 to 17 years of age to TCV Bir and those between 18 - 30 years of age to Tibetan Transit School. Old and infirm are admitted to the Old People's Home. Some of them return and those remaining here but with no source of income are given monthly allowances. Children admitted to the schools and also those in TCV Bir and Tibetan Transit School are given some amount of pocket money every month and the monks and nuns are provided with monthly stipend.
3. **Group Pilgrimage:** For those who have come here for pilgrimage, the Office of the Reception Centers arranges group tour with a guide as they do not speak the local language. During Kalachakra teachings, special arrangements are made for their permit with the Indian authorities and their accommodation and traveling are all taken care of.

The Tibetan Government in-exile has been doing its utmost to meet the expectation of the New refugees, but being a Government in-exile has its limitations and sometimes we are not able to fulfill all their desires.

APPENDIX

- Detail data of New Refugees who have reported to Dharamsala Reception Centers during the period January 1991 to March 1997 are attached herewith.
- Kindly note that we could be missing out on those who are not aware of the Office of the Reception Centers and its work and therefore haven't reported to us about their arrival etc. Thus, the number of New Refugees coming into exile could be more than the figure we have given.
- A list of health problems faced by them is also given. The source of this data is the Health record maintained by the Office of the Reception Centers, Dharamsala. At the Reception Center, only minor cases are attended to as we only have a Health Worker. A Health Record Booklet is maintained and kept by the individuals themselves.